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5-2009

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Recommended Citation

Murray, Susan E., "When a Parent Has a Mental Illness" (2009). *Lake Union Herald*. 468.
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FAMILY TIES

When a Parent Has a Mental Illness

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Growing up in any family has its challenges. But those challenges are compounded when a family member has a mental illness. Children living in a home where one or both of their parents have a mental illness experience instability, unpredictability and confusion.

It is common for us to take our reality and normalize it. It's one of the ways we survive. Only in looking back on our lives, do we sometimes realize how crazy things were in our childhood. Children living in a family with mental illness often take on some of the adult roles such as managing the younger children and carrying out many household duties. They often find themselves trying to take care of the emotional and even physical needs of their parent or parents, as well.

Children in this situation often don't receive the nurturing and parental care they need. They are generally embarrassed to talk about their situation and feel ashamed. Children are excellent recorders but are often poor interpreters. When there are chronic family problems, they generally internalize that they are somehow causing the problems. They are also unsure of themselves, their place in the world and wonder if their parents really love them.

Living in a home with adult mental illness has lasting consequences. Children often grow up with guilt, resentment, continuing shame and embarrassment, depression, repressed anger and fear of inheriting their parent's illness. There is a high genetic component to schizophrenia, for example; and at least three genes have been identified as playing a role in the development of this illness. They also experience confusion about their own identity, often experiencing self-defeating thoughts, attitudes and behaviors.

These issues evidence themselves in many ways as adults, including difficulty initiating and maintaining friendships and lasting relationships, difficulty balancing care of self and taking care of others, difficulty trusting themselves and others, excessive dependence on others or overly avoiding inti-

macy, and being overly responsible or irresponsible in many areas of life such as commitments, money, alcohol, etc.

The Christian community in general has historically not done a very good job of understanding and ministering to those with mental illness. It has often been seen as a spiritual weakness, the presence of demons, or just like any other illness—get yourself some help. How many Christians have been told, “If you just prayed more and developed a better attitude, you wouldn't be so depressed!” In the past all many had was prayer; and for a few, some counseling. Now, because we have a much better understanding of brain function, we also have more effective medications and counseling. Many have lived with a mental illness, or with someone with a mental illness who went undiagnosed. A grandparent, or an aunt or uncle, may have suffered from mental illness affecting the entire family system. Even today it may remain a family secret.

If you are living with or have lived with parental mental illness, you can help yourself. Acknowledge the truth and the effects it has had on you. Love the sufferer, but take action. Get help now! Develop new ways to take care of yourself and new ways to relate to others. Seek more information and find the support you need.

Understand that neither you nor the person with the mental illness is to blame for it. Learning all you can about the illness is invaluable. A positive attitude, a rich prayer life, and a deep and abiding faith in God's care are invaluable.



Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.